The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
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DEAR MEMBER,

It was stated a short time ago in the press that the scientific advisers of the Vichy Ministry of Agriculture and Food had warned Marshal Pétain that, unless supplies of vitamin "A" in the form of codliver or halibut oil could be brought from America before January, three-quarters of the children of France would be in danger of dying from malnutrition or from inability to resist infectious diseases. Surveys made by American Quakers and Red Cross experts are said to confirm this.

Mr. Herbert Hoover has initiated a movement for sending food supplies from America to the countries occupied by Germany under conditions which would ensure the use of these supplies for the purpose intended. He has stated that, unless this action is taken, the greater part of 30,000,000 people will starve. The British Prime Minister stated in Parliament that it is not practicable to relax the blockade to admit such supplies. He promised at the same time that measures would be taken to arrange in advance for the speedy entry of food into any part of the enslaved area as soon as it has been wholly cleared of German forces and to encourage the building up all over the world of reserves of food for the purpose.

It is evident from our correspondence that the question of the blockade is gravely exercising the minds of many of our members. It is, of course, inextricably bound up with the problem of the war as a whole. But it forces to the front in their acutest form some of the questions arising out of the war. Are the arguments which have been used in the past in defence of a just war still valid for totalitarian war and all its consequences? Logical minds on both sides have fastened on the blockade as a test case. I have read speeches recently which say in effect: "We are starving, and mean to starve, women and children in Germany by our blockade; why should we shrink from raining hell on them by indiscriminate bombing from the air?" On the other hand, some of our members have recourse to the double-edged argument: "You ask us to draw a line between war and murder, between the killing of combatants and of non-combatants. The blockade will kill and injure more non-combatants than indiscriminate bombing."

My object in this letter is to contribute to the clarification of thought. Whatever may be said on so large and difficult a subject must leave many of you dissatisfied.

War is something to which the Christian can never be inwardly reconciled. The whole moral being of one who has learned anything from Christ must revolt against its hideousness and cruelty. He cannot be indifferent to protests against the inhumanities to which it gives rise. It would be a dreary and dying world in which such voices of pity were no longer heard; a world in which Nazi callousness had finally triumphed.

How then, if you admit this, some of you will ask, can you as a Christian support the war? The answer is that, while war has no place in the Kingdom of God, it may in the conditions of man's earthly life be the only means by which a *nation* (guided not by the principles of the Kingdom of God which it has not accepted but by those of justice and the moral law) can avert a menace to human society that is worse than war. In the political life of mankind the end may be great enough to justify in the last resort what

seems to be the only means of achieving it. But as the full effects of war are seen, the question remains to haunt us whether, even in the political sphere, the means are not in their nature such as inevitably to defeat the end. That is why Christians can never cease from the scrupulous examination of the means employed, such as indiscriminate bombing or the blockade.

THE FACTS

In arriving at a Christian judgment the first necessity is to see the facts objectively and to get rid of all self-deception resulting from emotional bondage. Is it possible, for example, that the reason for the volume of protests in recent weeks against reprisals in the air and the relative silence about the food blockade is that the latter is essential to the achievement of our military aims, while the former is in the view of military experts an unwise dissipation of military resources? We may be deceiving ourselves in wanting to have it both ways—to enjoy the satisfaction of taking a firm stand as men of principle and at the same time to avoid any serious risk. We must not forget that it may be easier for a mother to forgive the sudden swoop from the sky, which takes her child but leaves others throughout the country unscathed, than to watch on every side the increasing pallor on children's cheeks and the emaciation of their bodies, which no care or ingenuity can avert, knowing that a generation is growing up to become physical and mental wrecks incapable of repairing the devastations of the war.

The danger of self-deception is one from which those who are moved by humanitarian sentiments are no more immune than others. They also may be subject to emotional bondage. They must not, for example, brush aside the question whether the relaxation of the blockade might not increase the German power of resistance and thereby prolong the war, with the result that the total sum of human suffering would be enlarged rather than diminished.

It is essential to remember that *both* sides are attempting each to blockade the other. Nearly all the letters that reach me about the blockade write of it as though it were a one way street. In actual fact the Germans are doing their utmost to blockade this country. They boast that they are succeeding. They are at the present time making dangerous inroads on our shipping. But for the unceasing devotion of our seamen this country must either give in or starve. The blockade is not peculiarly *our* weapon. Blockade and bombing are in combination the means of reducing the enemy's supplies and thereby bringing about his defeat. Granted war, the blockade is a necessary means of waging it.

Help in ascertaining the facts may be obtained from the admirable series of Oxford Pamphlets (Oxford Press, 6d. each). Three of these bear immediately on our subject—*The Blockade* 1914-1919 by W. Arnold Foster, *Blockade and the Civilian Population* by Sir William Beveridge and *Britain's Blockade* by R. W. B. Clarke.

The facts given in the last named pamphlet show that apart from catastrophic failure of harvests the continent of Europe is self-sufficient in the matter of food. Such deficiencies as are created by the blockade are qualitative rather than quantitative. The continent is capable of feeding itself, though on an unattractive and monotonous diet. There is therefore in normal years no need to fear starvation or famine. If there is long-term shortage it will be due to the deliberate neglect by Germany of agriculture or the theft of food.

The immediate situation in the occupied territories, as contrasted with the long term position, is, however, more serious owing to the poor harvest and the social disorganisation of the present year. Even so, the evidence at present available does not suggest that widespread starvation is probable, though there may very well be sporadic and local shortages. These may be the cause of great suffering and must cause concern, but Mr. Hoover's sweeping statement is, as many American experts agree, a gross exaggeration.

It must be remembered, however, that apart from actual famine an inadequate and insufficiently varied diet reduces vitality, and that other things besides food, such as heating and clothing, are necessary to health and vigour. The shortage on the continent of coal and textiles is greater than of food. The sufferings of its peoples will, as the months pass, be greater than the imagination can picture. General Smuts described the effects on Europe of the blockade in the last war as " the most awful spectacle in history, which no man with any heart or regard for human destiny can contemplate without the deepest emotion."

RESPONSIBILITY

To deal rightly with a situation, it is necessary not only to know the facts but also to locate responsibility. Leaving on one side the deeper causes of the war, the direct responsibility for conditions in the occupied territories rests on the rulers of Germany. They provoked the war by their overweening ambition. They invaded without scruple neutral and inoffensive nations. If there is shortage, it is because the German Government commandeers supplies for its war purposes, or because it fails to provide the means for their distribution. It is wrong thinking to place on this country responsibility for a state of things which is due to the action and policy of the German Government.

But we also have a responsibility which we must squarely face. It is the responsibility of man for the distresses of his fellow-men. The sufferings of people on the continent, no matter by whom they have been caused, are intolerable for any one with humane sympathies. It is our duty to do everything in our power to relieve them. Four lines of action suggest themselves.

First, the measures of which the Prime Minister spoke to provide relief the moment the opportunity arises should be pressed forward with energy. The preparation needs to be thorough. This is the point on which attention should be focussed. Public opinion should be exerted to ensure that plans are made on an adequate scale and that the task is entrusted to the right hands. If we fail in this, and multitudes die or suffer in consequence, the blame will be ours. Every means of information should also be employed to let the peoples on the continent know that these preparations are being made.

But this does not meet the problem of a serious deficiency of the bare necessities of life *this winter*. Hence, secondly, if there is evidence of an undeniable shortage of food in the conquered countries, the question must be faced whether conditions can be created that would permit relief to be given in ways that will not assist the German or weaken the British war effort. Mr. Clarke suggests that the necessary conditions are four. First, the withdrawal of German troops from the " starvation " areas; secondly, the provision by the Germans of adequate transport in the conquered territory; thirdly, reliable evidence that Germany is not appropriating food from the invaded territory; and, fourthly, free access by neutrals to the press and radio to explain what is being done and the reasons for the British action in raising the blockade.

Thirdly, the question should be explored whether arrangements can be made for the evacuation overseas of children from the occupied countries. The number who could be saved in this way from the effects of malnutrition would at the best be only a small fraction of the whole. But the attempt to bring such help as is possible would be evidence of our good intentions. We should be doing what we can, even while waging war, to build a world in which humanity and compassion exercise their healing power.

Fourthly, it seems essential that the maintenance of the blockade to the extent that is necessary should be balanced by a clearer statement of our political faith and purpose. The peoples of Europe will not be content to suffer for what they suppose to be purely British interests. If they are allowed to interpret their sufferings in that way their attitude towards us may turn to bitter hate. The future of Europe depends on our power to convince them that the trials which they have to endure are for ends which include their good as well as ours.

THE QUESTION OF PURPOSE

The vital matter, to which I have often directed attention in the News-Letter, is the nature and single-mindedness of our purpose. A difference in purpose may give to the same act an entirely different meaning; it makes all the difference whether a father in punishing his son acts in a temper or from a selfish desire to get his own way, or is animated by a concern for the boy's true welfare. I read recently a somewhat contemptuous reference to this difference of purpose as something purely subjective, and therefore unimportant. I believe it to be the root of the whole business.

A good motive does not, of course, justify an act that is wrong in itself; the motive of love is not a valid defence in a murder charge. The infliction of *wanton* and unnecessary suffering is impossible for a Christian. But if what we are seeking is the ultimate good of mankind, including the German people; if we sincerely believe the forcible removal of the Nazi menace to be necessary to that good; if in our sober judgment the relaxation of the blockade would postpone that removal and prolong human suffering—then the singleness of that purpose will be a healing influence, working silently but efficaciously to alleviate and transmute the incidental, unintended and unavoidable sufferings which the prosecution of the war entails.

Is this view, some of you may ask, really distinguishable in substance from Hitler's doctrine of ruthlessness and the view that everything is permissible in war? My answer is that there is a difference of worlds—that, if our purpose is what I have described, it will in fact restrain us at many points. It will make us sensitive about any action that will sow the seeds of future bitterness or increase demoralization. It will make us eager to relieve suffering wherever we can be assured that to do so will not entail in the long run greater suffering. To seek the good of all through the dust and heat of war, to hold firmly through the conflict to a purpose which transcends it, is not easy for frail human nature. The example of Abraham Lincoln is a reminder that it is not impossible.

But we can succeed only if we continually hold in remembrance two things. The first is that life is lived, especially in war time, on the edge of an abyss. Our national purpose may pass by unnoticed changes into its opposite ; then all that matters will be lost. Secondly, because these sufferings are the inevitable accompaniment of war, our prayer for victory must always be at the same time a " Miserere," in as much as we are involved with our enemies in a common sinfulness.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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